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ABSTRACT

To determine if message recipients rely on heuristics when evaluating message validity, the study examines whether the differential impact of information framed in terms of losses (costs of not choosing an option) versus gains (benefits of choosing an option) might be a function of heuristic processing. Subjects, 87 undergraduate psychology students, read over a "practice" interview transcript that was either relevant (High Involvement) or irrelevant (Low Involvement) to an interview they would be doing. The transcript (persuasive message) contained six arguments presented in either Loss or Gain Language that advocated the implementation of senior comprehensive exams. Subjects were also classified as either High or Low Need for Cognition (NFC) based on pretesting. Results indicated that subjects were most influenced by the Loss Language message, but only under High Involvement conditions or when subjects were High in NFC. The impact of framing therefore seems to be more a function of systematic rather than heuristic information processing. (One table of data is included, and nine references are appended.) (MS)

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The Cognitive Mediation of Message Framing in Persuasion

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ABSTRACT

Previous research in persuasion indicates that message recipients may often rely on heuristics or simple decision rules when evaluating message validity. The present study examined whether the differential impact of information framed in terms of losses (costs of not choosing an option) versus gains (benefits of choosing an option) might be function of heuristic processing. Subjects read over a "practice" interview transcript that was either relevant (High Involvement) or irrelevant (Low Involvement) to an interview they would be doing. The transcript (persuasive message) contained six arguments presented in either Loss or Gain Language that advocated the implementation of senior comprehensive exams. Subjects were also classified as either High or Low Need for Cognition (NFC) based on pretesting. Results indicated that subjects were most influenced by the Loss Language message, but only under High Involvement conditions or when subjects were High in NFC. The impact of framing therefore seems to be more a function of systematic rather than heuristic information processing.

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INTRODUCTION

Previous research in persuasion indicates that message recipients may often rely on heuristics or simple decision rules when evaluating message validity (see Chaiken, 1980; Chaiken, in press). Heuristic processing generally involves assessing message validity based on persuasive cues that are not inherently present in the argumentation of a message (e.g., communicator expertise, message length).

The present study examined whether the impact of message framing might be a function of heuristic processing. Previous research has shown that information is responded to differently depending on whether it is presented in a loss frame (e.g., costs of not choosing an option) or a gain frame (e.g., benefits of choosing an option). For example, a number of decision-making studies have demonstrated that individuals who are given information in a loss (vs. gain) frame are more likely to choose options that involve risk (e.g., Eraker & Sox, 1981; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). In addition, a recent study in persuasion by Meyerowitz and Chaiken (1985) showed that women were more willing to perform breast self examination (BSE) when a message emphasized the costs of not performing BSE rather than the benefits of performing BSE.

If the impact of message framing operates similarly to a persuasion heuristic or superficial type of cue, individuals may not be carefully processing the arguments presented in the message. Instead, they may be focusing on whether that information is negative (e.g., focused on costs) or positive (e.g., focused on benefits) when

evaluating the message. Individuals who are given a loss frame message may base their evaluation on information that emphasize costs, while individuals who are given a gain frame message may rely on information that emphasizes benefits.

Research has shown that persuasion heuristics are more likely to exert an influence under low subject involvement conditions (Chaiken, 1980). Therefore, we examined framing as a function of involvement. If the framing effect does operate similarly to a persuasion heuristic, its impact may be more pronounced under low involvement.

The role of individual differences in Need for Cognition (NFC; Cacioppo, & Petty, 1982) was also examined. Individuals low in NFC are more prone to rely on heuristic processing (Axsom, Yates, & Chaiken, 1985), while individuals high in NFC show a greater tendency to engage in systematic processing (cognitively elaborating on the arguments in a message) (Cacioppo, Petty, & Morris, 1983). If framing is moderated by heuristic processing, then it might have a greater affect on individuals who are low in NFC.

METHOD

Several weeks prior to the experimental session undergraduate psychology subjects were given a pretest in class to asses their Need for Cognition.

Eighty-seven subjects participated in the experimental phase. They were told the study was designed to assess student opinions about the possible implementation of new university policies. Subjects were also told they would be participating in an individual interview in one week to assess their opinions about one of two policies. They were then given a "practice" transcript (persuasive message) to read that contained six arguments advocating the use of comprehensive exams as a requirement for undergraduates to graduate. Response Involvement was manipulated by varying whether the transcript was relevant (High Involvement) or irrelevant (Low Involvement) to their assigned policy.

To manipulate the framing of information, subjects were randomly assigned to receive information presented in gain or loss language. Gain arguments stressed the benefits of incorporating comprehensive exams (e.g., students will be more likely to study and learn more). In contrast, the loss arguments emphasized the costs associated with not incorporating the exam (e.g., students will be less likely to study and learn more). Afterwards, subjects indicated their opinion toward implementing comprehensive exams and completed supplemental measures.

RESULTS

Manipulation checks indicated that high (vs. low) involvement subjects reported putting more effort into understanding the message arguments ($p < .01$). Also, individuals high (vs. low) in NFC tended to report putting more effort into comprehending the arguments ($p < .08$). With regard to the framing manipulation, analysis of argument recall indicated that subjects given loss language than subjects who were given gain frame information ($p < .01$). However, subjects who received loss frame information were just as likely to recall arguments in gain language as subjects who received gain frame information ($p < 1$).

Attitude data were analyzed using an analysis of covariance with initial attitude as a covariate. The adjusted means for opinion data are presented in Table 1. The results revealed a near significant interaction between framing and NFC ($p < .06$). Contrary to our predictions, post-hoc comparisons indicated that subjects who were high in NFC showed more agreement with the loss (vs. gain) frame message. Low NFC subjects did not differ as a function of framing. The interaction between framing and involvement was marginally significant ($p < .07$) and indicated a similar trend. Post-hoc comparisons revealed that high involvement subjects indicated more agreement with the loss (vs. gain) frame message, while low involvement subjects were unaffected by framing.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings in this experiment were opposite from our predictions. High NFC subjects and high Involvement subjects were more influenced by loss arguments than gain arguments. However, low NFC subjects and subjects under low Involvement conditions were unaffected by type of framing. It is interesting to note that subjects given loss frame information were as likely to recall gain arguments as subjects given gain frame information. These results suggest that the stronger impact of the loss frame may be more a function of systematic rather than heuristic processing. The stronger impact of the loss frame may be due to an increased effort to process or translate loss information into gain language. Other researchers have suggested that individuals convert negative sentences into affirmative sentences when given an evaluation task (Wason & Johnson-Laird, 1972). Further research is needed to more directly examine the nature of cognitive processes that mediate that framing effect.

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TABLE 1

Adjusted Mean Bipolar Attitude Scores as a Function of Need for Cognition, Involvement and Message Framing

	Need for Cognition		Involvement	
	HIGH	LOW	HIGH	LOW
GAIN FRAME	6.89	7.40	6.65	7.80
LOSS FRAME	8.68	6.98	7.91	7.35

Note: Higher numbers indicate greater opinion change. Cell no. range from 16 to 25.